

Proper 21, Season of Creation
Skywoman

The Way of Reciprocity
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Skywoman

Rev. Wong's adaptation of the story from "Braiding Sweetgrass"

So it began. A shaft of light broke through the sky, and she descended like a maple leaf, clutching one thing from her homeworld. A good guest, she brought an offering. Below, she only saw water. But the creatures below all saw her, twirling round and round, traveling down the shaft of light, faster and faster toward the earth. The geese looked at one another and moving as one, took off to the sky to catch her, to soften her descent. As she felt the feathers about her, she gasped with gratitude for this welcome, this goodwill. When the geese brought her gently onto the water, they knew they would not be able to bear her for very long.

Turtle swam over to give his back to Skywoman. And she stepped onto the back of Turtle. The creatures—loons, otters, beavers, swans, fish of every kind—had a family meeting. Skywoman is safe for the time being, but she cannot flourish on Turtle's back forever. She needed land. They had heard that way down, deep below the water was land. So, the deepest divers volunteered to go down. Loon dove and dove, but had to turn around, coming out of the water gasping. It was too deep. So Otter tried and Beaver tried, but they all came up, lunges burning, without touching land. Some other creatures tried and tried so hard, they were never seen again. There seemed no one left who could go. All were silent, when, shyly, Muskrat volunteered to go. The council of creatures were doubtful. If the others couldn't do it, how could she? But Muskrat had the biggest heart and her hospitality knew no bounds. So she dove, and dove...for a long time. For a long time the creatures above waited for her. They became

uneasy...she'd been gone for such a long time. They feared the worst for their sister Muskrat. Then, they saw a few bubbles rise up to the surface, and soon Muskrat floated up on her back, limp. She had given her life to help this newly arrived human.

They saw that in her paws, she clutched two fistfuls of mud. Her sacrifice was not for naught! Turtle said, "Spread the mud on my back." As Skywoman spread the mud across Turtle's back, her heart was filled with gratitude for all that was done for her. They all worked together, spreading the mud. And she danced and danced with gratitude, and out of that gratitude, out of their work together, the earth grew and grew, till it became this place, where we live. It is called Turtle Island, our home.

Finally, Skywoman, a guest in this world, proffered her offering—a bag of seeds of every kind from her home world. She began to dance again, and as she danced, she sowed the seeds of her offering, plants of every kind grew. Plants for food, plants for medicine, plants that could make dwellings, and plants for the sheer delight of their beauty. Skywoman tended the plants and now all the creatures had plenty to eat. The creatures adopted Skywoman as sister and they all lived together as a family, caring for one another on Turtle Island.

I first encountered this story in Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This is a creation story from among the First Peoples of this land. This creation story make me see things differently about what it means to be human:

- It makes me consider that we humans are latecomers in the story of this earth and we have the most to learn about how to live here.
- It makes me think that being human is a beautiful thing because we can do good for our fellow creatures, that together there is enough, more than enough.
- It makes me think we are here as guests and, yet, because of the hospitality of creation, we benefited from the goodwill of the creatures around us.

- This story has me thinking that this goodwill has placed us in kinship with all of creation, and that kinship places us in reciprocity to one another.

It also makes me wonder how we have not considered ourselves as newcomer—but as owner, as ones given dominion and domination. It also makes me see that we have not lived in kinship with creation, but saw ourselves as separate, as better, as the pinnacle of creation. It also makes me see that we have not seen ourselves as caretakers, but just as takers.

I was listening to an NPR report on a new mental health crisis related to depression and anxiety at the destruction of our planet and the reality of global climate heating. This is especially affecting younger people, who are inheriting the mess of generation. What I see is there is a deep longing for right relationship with God's creation and despair at the immensity of the problem and the systems that perpetuate the problem. We are having a hard time not just imagining how systems can be changed, we are having a hard time seeing the goodness of being human.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, whom we read in place of the epistle today, is a mother, a decorated scientist and professor, and a member of the Potawatomi Nation of the First Peoples of this land. She is also a poet, an advocate for the planet, and transmitter of indigenous wisdom into the world of science. In one of her classes on botany, she surveyed her class as to their knowledge of the positive interactions between humans and the environment. She was stunned when her class, two-thirds of whom would choose a career in environmental protection, on the median said, "none". They didn't see how humans could be good for the planet. Dr. Kimmerer remarked this profound observation, "As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of [our] vision." Our spiritual imagination is being choked by the smog, the plastic, the carbon. This will not help the earth.

It's time to see differently, hear differently, act differently. This is indeed how the gospel begins. It began with John the Baptist proclaiming a way to see: Let the mountains be made low and the valleys be lifted—remove the

obstacles to your vision and have a good look! Now repent. For one who is coming is going to say the same, “Repent. Change your mind; change your perspective, change the way you see.” In both of our readings from scripture, this is exactly what is not happening. The Israelites in the desert were freed from bondage because God saw their misery. But, they continued to see with the eyes of their enslavement, and whenever things got hard, they wanted to return to Egypt. They treated as someone to do their bidding. Give them quails, manna, water. Yes, they needed food, yes, they needed water. But, they were in the desert because they needed something for their souls—they needed to see differently, to change their minds from an enslaved one to a freed one. The sad thing is they never did. All the first generation that left Egypt will die in the wilderness.

So, the religious leaders in the Gospel reading are also stuck. They depend on their goodness to possess the Kingdom. Some will argue (in the Gospel of John) that they know they belong to the right position because their ancestors ate manna. And Jesus will retort, “They ate manna and they died!” Today, Jesus is essentially telling the religious leaders, “You depend on your version of being good, but you never change your mind about your insides. It is those who repent—who change their minds—that understand how to live in the Kingdom.”

Today, we need a repentance, a perspective change, on how we relate to this world. We even need to revise the way we think about science. As Dr. Kimmerer says in the reading from today, we can’t just work on restoration and depend on the scientists to figure this thing out. We need a whole new way of being in this world. Dr. Kimmerer says it is time we weave together all the strands of intelligence, braid them together like sweetgrass, so that together, these intelligences are stronger than when apart. What are these intelligences? There’s western science, there’s indigenous wisdom, and there is the wisdom of the created order. The plants and animals have much to teach us about how to be in relationship with this earth. What if we were to listen to them?

Dr. Kimmerer ultimately underscores the way of reciprocity. It is the way of Skywoman and the animals. Let us go back to the story. Recall...the way she fell, a stranger from the sky, recall how all the family of creatures worked together to welcome her, make room for her, and even give their life for her. Recall her gratitude, her joy, her dance, and her offering. Recall how her gift multiplied and there was enough, more than enough. Recall how they adopted her as sister and now related to one another as sister, as brother, as sibling.

So the way of reciprocity—let us put on this new mind:

- That we humans are latecomers in the story of this earth, and we have the most to learn about how to live well here.
- That being human is a beautiful thing because we can do good for our fellow creatures.
- That we benefit from the goodwill of the creatures around us.
- That this goodwill has placed us in kinship with all of creation

What if we were to begin, again, like this?

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Synopsis: The story of Skywoman tells us how to live well on this earth because it shows us the way of reciprocity and kinship with all of creation. What if we began our story like this?